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ABSTRACT

As in urban schools, at-risk students in rural schools may be unmotivated, lack purpose for learning, have special learning problems, or come from dysfunctional families. In this paper, an experienced teacher in a small rural Oklahoma high school describes her efforts to demonstrate that at-risk students would improve in all language areas as a result of intensive work in English, using an integrated approach to language arts. Her 20 students (including special education mainstreamed, transient, limited-English-speaking, and unmotivated students) had scored in the lower 50 percent on standardized tests. Instructional methods were based on the idea that, despite special programs, secondary students do not become better readers or writers, because they lack intensive reading practice, the background knowledge and general information that enables comprehension, writing experience and practice, and the vocabulary needed in various subjects. Elements of the approach included study skills; structure and self-discipline; a rigorous vocabulary program (including etymology); handwriting instruction; speed reading; thematic units to improve comprehension; local history; instruction in grammar and the conventions of written language as prompted by need during in-class writing assignments; and the integration of writing, speaking, and listening in every assignment. At the end of the year, students had made significant growth as measured by standardized test scores and evident improvement in self-esteem. (SV)

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TEACHING AT-RISK STUDENTS: A QUALITY PROGRAM IN A SMALL RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

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TEACHING AT-RISK STUDENTS: A QUALITY PROGRAM IN A SMALL RURAL HIGH SCHOOL

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Bigger is not always better; this is especially true when at-risk students are trying to survive school. Often a small rural school is the best place to help these students survive and even succed. If one watches the television media or reads the metropolitan papers, she can assume that at-risk students are found only in urban areas, and, perhaps, in a few suburban schools. However, those of us who are fortunate enough to live and teach in rural areas know that there are students here, too,who are at risk of dropping out, of failing, of falling into drug and alcohol abuse. Add to that limited time and resources of faculty and staff, and rural schools are faced with the "At-Risk Student Problem" just as urban areas are.

For the purposes of this article, I am defining At-Risk as those students in rural schools who are unmotivated, without purpose for learning or schooling, or with special learning problems (learning disabled,emotionally disturbed, or slow learners). They are often from non-traditional families or dysfunctional families. Their parent(s) may have to drive 30 to 50 miles to find work, making time at home with children minimal. These students often come from low-income families since their moving to the rural area may be a means of survival, not a means of finding a quality life. They are often from parents without the old traditional values once associated with rural life, especially in farming and ranching areas. True these same definitions may fit urban or suburban students, but in these schools there are more counselors, and there are more social services available. The urban teacher may have a supervisor or coordinator to whom she can turn. These resources are often lacking in the rural areas. Too, rural teachers are always on call and students may feel free to

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drop by just any time, which, in turn, takes time and energy from the teacher.

On the brighter side, the rural teacher may not be faced with the truly incorrigible student who is already a hardened criminal. She is not likely to have students who carry weapons--or who carry them for long. The teacher is likely to know first-hand the home conditions that contributed to the student's problems. She may know the parent well enough to contact her or him personally without taking several intermediate steps.

What can the rural English teacher do to alleviate these special problems? I came face-to-face with this question when I returned to my home community and the high school where I had taught for ten years in the fifties and sixties. I had been absent from that school for 25 years. I was hired to teach reading and English to the "at-risk" students in this high school in the fall of 1990. I had the opportunity to begin an experiment with 20 high school students--one girl (my own granddaughter!) and 19 boys-- in proving that intensive work in English, using an integrated language arts approach, would result in improvement in all the language areas. I chose to teach these 20 students in two reading classes of 10 students each so I could give each one more attention. I also had these same students in English and some of them in speech. The other English teachers took all those students scoring above the 50% on the ITBS or scoring high on the state writing assessment. This arrangement proved to be a wise decision, even though it meant teaching one more class than my half-time contract. This decision also flew in the face of the current literature about "tracking" students. However, other than for English and the related language subjects, these students were in heterogeneous classes.

Who were these students? I deliberately chose the students who had scored

in the lower 50% on the state-mandated tests. They averaged out to be about a third special education mainstreamed (mostly L. D., with one seriously emotionally disturbed and a couple with low I. Q. scores), the untaught because of their being transient, two ESL students, and the rest "leisure learners" who were highly unmotivated (I use the term "leisure learners" because they assure me they intend to learn sometime. They just haven't gotten around to it yet!)

My principles for teaching these students had been developed over a period of years of teaching others like them in Kansas and Colorado, in my research as a university professor, and from observation of other successful programs. It has long been my theory that secondary students do not become better readers or writers, despite special programs, because they lack intensive reading practice, they lack background knowledge and general information which enables comprehension, they lack experience and practice in writing, and they lack vocabulary in various subject areas which handicaps them.

I began with teaching study skills (a new idea to these fellows--and the one girl). I insisted on note taking every day. In fact, I took up their notebooks and "graded" them for a nine weeks grade. I insisted on their following my few rules--respect for me, respect for each other, giving me their undivided attention, and getting to class on time with proper "equipment." It did not take long for me to discover that what these folk needed most of all was some structure and self-discipline--a completely new idea, it seemed. Becausel am older and an assertive disciplinarian, they listened. However, the first week one of the boys looked around the room, looked at me, and said, "I thought you had a doctor's degree." I assured him I do, but that I do not deliver babies or calves (both kind of doctors

being in demand here). He then replied, "Then how did you get stuck with us?" This remark led me to try to help these students realize they were not the "dummies"just because they had my class. I told them that because of my degrees , I only taught those whom I chose, and that they looked like they could learn, so I chose them. I then set out to prove it!

In addition to study skills, I used a rigorous vocabulary program, not one in which they memorized words, but one in which they studied language--morphemes, function shift, and phonology. I used these very terms with the students. I taught them the history of their own Indo-European, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, multi-cultural language. They learned etymology as well as learned how to pronounce and spell the word and define it. A great deal of complaining took place the first few weeks, but I kept on giving the tests over until every student passed. No excuses. I taught handwriting to these sophomores, juniors and seniors. I insisted they write legibly. I just returned their papers ungraded until they did.

I used the techniques from all the years I had taught speed reading in high school, at the university, and to employees of large corporations to build rate and fluency--a major problem with poor readers. Students thought it fun to keep score on themselves. I also had them keep a practice chart and read for 30 minutes at home at night with the parent signing off that he or she saw the student do it. For the first several weeks, I had difficulty convincing both parents and students that they had to do this for a grade.

I taught thematic units to improve comprehension and to build background knowledge, especially in social studies. I also used these units to teach literary

elements. Out of every unit came opportunities to read, write, speak, and listen. Students wrote books for younger children, for instance, which they then took to the elementary school and read to the students. Students in the elementary school judged the stories and prizes were given to the winning writers. In turn, these elementary children wrote stories and brought them to us for their presentation.

Among these units, I used one on the history of our county, which is colorful and full of action. Students read two non-fiction books about this area, both by Harry E. Chrisman: Fifty Years On the Owl Hoot Trail and Lost Trails of the Cimarron. They then studied two local histories of the county which I had helped edit twenty years ago. They also read Man and the Oklahoma Panhandle by Berenice Jackson. They wrote letters to Mr. Chrisman, criticizing both of the books and commenting on any families they knew who might be related to the real people in his books. Then I assigned each student to go to a local cemetery in the county and make a rubbing of a headstone (similar to a brass rubbing from churches in England). I brought my own brass rubbings from English graves to show the students and explained how to do this technique. Their assignment was to find the oldest grave in the cemetery and make a rubbing, then look up that person in one of the previously listed books to find out about the family. They then were to write about that person or about his or her family. The next assignment was a field trip to the Jones and Plummer Trail Museum in Beaver, Oklahoma, to view the artifacts and pictures there. Finally, they had to write a short story based on a real historical person from this area. Most of these students had never written more than five lines in their lives. I used writing partners for them to have a cooperative learning experience. I worked with them in group instruction, using note cards, to help them develop the conflict-resolution, the setting, and the characters. We

discussed point of view and how that would change the story. It was amazing the quality of stories the students wrote.

As a follow-up to the above assignments, I showed a video tape from PBS about the author Chrisman, who wrote to the classes in response to their letters. Another activity was for the students to read Shane by Jack Schaefer and Cherokee Trail by Louis L'Amour and write a comparison of these fictionalized stories about the Old West with those of Chrisman's nonfiction accounts. The few students who still live on ranches in the area brought old family pictures to share. Students still talk about how much fun this unit was.

During that first year, students read eleven novels or nonfiction books and five short stories. They also studied Julius Caesar, Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet. These are students who have never read a book before, they say, and I believe them

At the end of the school year their scores had improved significantly at the point .01 level on the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, blue level. Even though their punctuation skills and spelling accuracy were not perfect, they were able to write interesting coherent prose in the type of discourse required.

What were the key elements of the program? Structure and self-discipline to get work in on time, many hours of reading in front of me so that I knew they were doing it, and the use of an integrated approach, using writing, speaking,and listening with every assignment. Students wrote all assignments in class so that I could help them as they composed. I taught grammar and usage and the conventions of written language in mini-lessons as the need arose. Having students read their emerging compositions aloud helped them understand the "rules" they

needed to follow to make the reader understand what they intended. But most importantly, these students found out that they were intelligent and capable students. At the end of the year,"forgetting" I was not still a college professor, I handed out a course evaluation .One of the questions I asked was, "What was the most important thing you learned this year?" I thought that they would say, "I learned about Beaver County and Cimarron Territory, " or "I learned study skills, " or "I learned about Anne Frank." Instead, in various terms, each one said, "I learned I was not stupid."

At the end of that year the teacher for whom I was teaching half-time did not choose to return to her full-time position. The superintendent asked me to stay another year. I agreed to teach one more year since I had had such a good time the first year. This decision meant I would have to change the materials since many of these same students would be in my class again. Even though they had made significant gains, most were not up to the 50% on the ITBS so I "chose" them again. It was fun to be able to have the discretion to select books I thought these students would like and would profit from since I now knew most of them personally. I had the same arrangement with ten in each section.

Again, I used the structured study skills routine and a strong vocabulary program. Essentially, I ran the class the same way I had done, using thematic units, much writing, and some public speaking. One of the units I used was a "Rite of Passage" theme with young adult literature selections. Students read Light in the Forest, When the Legends Die, No Promises in the Wind, My Brother Sam Is Dead , A Day No Pigs Would Die, and Tex. They then wrote an essay on Rite of Passage about themselves and related it to one or more of the characters in these books. This year they also read Fahrenheit 451 which they found very difficult; that is no surprise. Poor readers often find science

fiction hard to read. However, they HAD to finish it, and then write a paper on censorship. Their task was to defend a book from the censors, any book. Since most of them had never read anything except in my class, most of them chose A Day No Pigs Would Die. I had recounted to them a challenge of this book by parents in an urban district where I was the language arts coordinator. They were amazed that anyone would object to this book since these students are at least familiar with agriculture!

The students favorite book this year was Of Mice and Men. To say they were riveted to it is stating it mildly. My most "leisure learner" read it overnight. After they finished and took a comprehension test over it, we watched the movie starring Robert Blake. Some cried. Remember, these were two classes with nearly all junior and senior boys!

As a final project for this year, I chose library books that I thought students would like, selecting each one for the student personally (and letting them know that). Most choices were young adult literature. The one major exception was Truman Capote's In Cold Blood since the setting is very near our town. Students then had to give a 10 minute book talk. I was pleasantly surprised that they coached each other and asked permission to go on the stage to practice on each other before they actually had to deliver the presentation before the entire class. Some of these students were also in the speech class I taught, so I made them the "official" coaches.

Are these students now "cured" and wonderful readers and writers? No. They

probably will never read at the level they should for their developmental age because they started too late, or because some have severe learning disabilities. Are they better readers? Yes, definitely. Do they write better? Yes, they scored as well as the students in the other English classes on the state writing test the second year this program was in place. Do they have more knowledge at their command? Yes, definitely. Do they know more words than before? Of course. Do they do better on standardized tests? Sometimes. They are still petrified of them. (But aren't we all when we have to take them?) Or students do not see the reason for having to take them, so they do not read the questions, only mark the answer sheet. Will I teach again? Yes, indeed, when the superintendent asked me back for "one more year, I couldn't wait to sign the contract. Would I do this anywhere else? Probably not. Only in a small rural school can one impose the standards, structure, and demands for excellence from a mix of students like these and get results. I've always been an advocate of rural schools, even when I was language arts coordinator for 76,000 students in one district. I still am.